

# VITALIS

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## THE COLONY



JASON HALSTEAD

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| <b>Jason Halstead</b> |
| <b>The Colony</b>     |

## The Colony

# Chapter 1

“ They had a transport ship — No way they could land that on a planet!” The brown haired man talking was soft spoken in spite of his derisive tone. The woman at the radar station looked at the speaker and chewed on the piercing in her lip. It was one of many piercings adorning her face and shaven scalp.

“ Something you want to add, Lizzie?”

She jerked and spun to look at the new speaker, the captain of the Black Hole. She nodded. “Klous...yes, I mean, yes Sir, that is. I found the Rented Mule, it crashed. In the water, but less than a couple hundred feet deep.”

“ Is that all?” Klous snorted. He ran his fingers through his spiked blond hair and stared at Lizzie until she turned away. “The Hole isn’t much better than that transport was for planetary operations.”

“ I can set us down nearby. Lizzie’s coordinates are just off a shore.” The speaker was Aran Black, the pilot of the Black Hole.

“ It’d be a shame to come all this way and go with nothing.” The unassuming man’s eyes were wide with what the Captain knew to be excitement. He’d known the man far too long to misjudge it, and far too long to repress the shudder at what it meant.

“ Don’t go freaking out, Cooper, I’ll have your ass confined,” Klous growled at him.

“ Any survivors?”

Klous craned his neck to see the only survivor from the failed boarding attempt of the Rented Mule standing there. The Captain’s eyes narrowed dangerously but before he could rebuke the man for his uninvited interruption Lizzie spoke up.

“ I think so.” She still stared at the display in front of her while her hands were pressed firmly against the data induction pad on her station. She nodded a moment later, the rings in her ears jangling against one another. “Yes, I’ve got more wreckage on the shore.”

“ More wreckage?”

“ Not a crash site, but it looks like they used a smaller craft to evacuate the transport.”

“ No signs of life though?”

“ Oh, lots! The entire planet is alive,” Lizzie paused to look at them. She shrugged, causing more jangles. “I’ve never seen readings like this. I think maybe Earth would have looked like this thousands of years ago. Huge forests, warm temperatures, and incredible numbers of animals or other life forms moving.”

“ Humans? Or...”

“ Too big for people. No signs of cities or building either.”

Klous grunted. "I don't like it. We were supposed to board the damn ship in space! We get the cargo and split the bounty on the target. This is a pile of rat shit is what it is!"

"Klous, this system isn't on any charts. This planet — it don't exist."

"What's that mean?" The Captain growled back at Aran.

"Means this place hasn't been discovered yet. We're outside the core worlds. Shit, we're outside the rim systems by light years! Salvage in space is claimed by whoever finds it..."

"This is a planet, not salvage."

"All the other planets humans have settled and terraformed they knew about beforehand. Settlers and engineers were sent with that in mind. This place is ready!"

"No shipping lanes this far out and I don't like a few years of cold sleep between our hideout and civilized space!"

"Klous, not a hideout — we can run this world! That much green down there, it's a fucking paradise! People will flock to it and pay whatever we demand."

Klous stared at the excited pilot. His suspicious eyes widened as he digested the words and realized what the man meant.

"One problem," Brand interrupted — again — from behind the Captain. "People that discover it first are the ones that got the rights to it."

Klous chuckled. "What problem? It's just another salvage run. Sometimes the salvage needs a little help."

Brand nodded. "You might still split that bounty."

"Two point five million in core script is nothing compared to this!"

Cooper leaned forward, his teeth emerging in a smile. "We going hunting?"

Klous stared at him, shaking his head in mild disapproval. "One of these days your hobby is going to get you killed."

Cooper shrugged, clearly unconcerned. "So?"

Klous sighed. "Aran, take us down. Lizzie, find the best spot and see if you can get anything on where the survivors went."

"It's been nine months, there's no telling how far they got or if they're even still alive," her final words sounded almost hopeful.

Klous shrugged. "Easier for us then."

"Do you want me to send out a salvage beacon marking this as our find?" Lizzie asked.

Klous ran his hand through his hair again, then nodded. "Yeah, let's make this official."

She focused on her display again as diagrams and words flashed across it. A few moments later she said, "The beacon's ready. Instead

of a derelict ship name we need a name for the planet.”

Klous glanced at the others on the bridge. They returned his stare, each openly curious but offering nothing. Finally he grinned. “Vitalis. Let’s call it Vitalis.”

## Chapter 2

“ You sure it’s only been nine months?” Ling Soon, the Black Hole’s engineer, asked. He stood up, stretching to his full towering height, and shook his head. “This thing’s been gutted and the rust on it has it falling apart. I don’t know much about air and water wearing metal down, but I’d say this has been here for years.”

Aran shook his head. “Lizzie and I checked and checked again, they’ve been here nine months, give or take a few days.”

Ling whistled, then wiped the sweat off his forehead back into his short dark hair. “Breeze is nice but it sure is hot.”

“ Wait until you get in the jungle,” Cooper said. The others glanced at him but looked away. The excitement was evident in his voice. “No wind,” he continued, unaware of their discomfort, “just the heat making you sweat and the insects and predators smelling you and wanting to taste-”

“ Cooper!” Klous snarled, stopping him. Cooper looked at the Captain and shrugged, then turned to stare back into the forest. Klous glared at him a minute longer then shook his head and turned to the others. “Lizzie, Ling, stay with the Hole. Last thing we need is them circling back and stealing our ship while we’re looking for them.”

“ Go inside and lock it down,” Brand advised. “These aren’t just drifters running a transport, they had military experience.”

Klous grunted. The last run-in with the Rented Mule had cost him several of his crew. Nobody important to him, other than how a couple of the girls had been trying to impress him and earn a better share. He did miss Talya’s lips...

“ Captain?”

Klous glanced over and up at Ling. Everyone was staring at him and he realized he’d been daydreaming about Talya. Or rather the last time she’d spent some quality time in his cabin. He pushed it aside and grunted, “Yeah.”

“ We won’t activate it unless it’s absolutely necessary.” Ling said, taking Klous’s terse statement to be agreement.

He dug deep and realized Ling was talking about JimBob, the modified sentinel robot he’d picked up a few years back. Relative years, considering the amount of time spent in hibernation units while traveling outside of the jump stations. The JB-1203 unit had been decommissioned and little more than scrap, but he’d picked it up off a fence who had salvaged it and had it retrofitted with pulse lasers. The radioactive isotope that powered the robot still had a half life of nearly 11,000 years. The robot’s programming on the other hand, had always been a little quirky.

“ Don’t suppose they left a trail for us?” Ling’s assistant asked. She was the Black Hole’s handywoman, capable of fixing just about anything short of the complicated ship’s engine. Now she just looked uncomfortable and hot, with sweat stains under her large breasts and running down her displayed cleavage.

Klous looked away from her before he let himself be distracted again. The sudden intense interest he was finding in sex alarmed him. Sasha was okay looking, he supposed, but she was a little big for his tastes. None of his crew was obese by any means, but Sasha had always been a little thicker than he preferred.

The pirate Captain scowled at his thoughts. Even fighting against it he was still distracted. “Brand, take the lead.”

Brand grunted and hefted his laser rifle. He’d put on a reinforced vest, muttering to the others how the Mule’s people had shot back with ballistic weapons. Klous doubted the vest would do the man any good but said nothing to stop him. A few minutes out of the wind from the ocean and he knew Brand would be less worried about it too.

Klous fell in behind Brand and glanced back to make sure the others followed him. Sasha came next, then Aran and finally Cooper. He thought it odd that Cooper would be in the rear — usually when it came to sniffing out fresh prey Cooper liked first dibs. Or at least he knew that’s what Cooper thought of it as.

Klous suppressed the shudder and refocused on Brand as the man pushed aside some fern-like vegetation and entered the jungle. Klous followed a few feet behind him and gasped as the wall of humidity and heat pressed against him. He kept moving, refusing to show weakness, and heard similar grunts, curses, and explosions from behind him as his crew followed.

Somewhere ahead something screeched. A bird or an animal, the sound pulled Klous’s attention from the fresh sweat beading his forehead to the tropical rainforest ahead. He glanced at the others and saw them staring into the distance as well. His eyes lingered on Sasha as a large bead of sweat ran between her breasts and out of sight.

Klous swore and ripped his gaze away from her. Brand had kept moving and had opened up several additional feet between them. He hurried to catch up, slipping on some moss that covered a rock as he did so. He grunted as he fell, but managed to catch himself with one hand while he held his laser rifle free of the ground with the other.

“ You all right?” Brand asked, offering him a hand.

Klous took it and pulled himself up. He tested his leg and back and nodded. “Fuckin’ garden here,” he grunted. Brand smirked, then turned away to head deeper into the jungle.

“ Look!”

Klous turned and stared at Sasha’s breasts, which had already

become more pronounced as the sweat made her tank top not only cling to them, but mold itself around them.

“Something’s over there!”

He followed her arm, where she pointed down a path in the jungle. Klous saw nothing, aside from some swaying leaves. He looked down, noting that the mixture of dirt and sand was moist but held tracks that were decidedly not human. “What’d you see?” He asked, not looking at her for fear he’d be unable to stare her in the eyes.

“Something moved. It was there then it was gone. Kind of brown I guess, but I didn’t see it well. Like a big cat or something, maybe?”

Klous grunted. He knew nothing about tracking or footprints and staring at them wasn’t educating him. He looked up and forced himself to ignore Sasha, who’d stepped closer to him. He could even smell her, she was so close. It wasn’t an ugly or unpleasant smell; it was something appealing and earthy. His nostrils flared as he tried to draw in more of it.

“Aran! Get up here,” Klous groaned. “Take her place.”

“What? Why!” Sasha protested. She glanced back and hissed, “Captain, I don’t want to be next to — hey, where’s Cooper?”

The Captain followed her gaze that went all the way back to the line of undergrowth at the edge of the beach and the jungle. They’d barely moved twenty feet in, yet Cooper was gone. He turned to stare at where Sasha had seen the animal. Even the leaves had stopped moving.

“Cooper!” He hissed once, then again more loudly. He was met with only silence and the buzzing of strange, and large, insects. Another screech from the forest, not as far away this time, sounded. Three answering screeches followed.

“Captain?” Sasha asked, worry evident in her tone.

“You think they survived?” Aran asked.

“They’re out there,” Brand growled, staring into the depths of the jungle. He wiped his brow with the back of his arm before tugging on the vest to let some air in. “I can feel it!”

“You’re fucking crazy,” Sasha hissed at him.

“Better than being a fat coward!” Brand spat back at her.

Klous watched Sasha’s eyes widen. She started past him, hands already coming up. Klous grabbed her, reaching for her shoulder but finding his hand slid down her sweat-slicked skin too easily and fondled her boob even as she tried to slip away from him. His hand was tangled in the strap of her tank top, yanking it enough to let her boob slip free. She struggled for a moment then stopped and glared at him. She yanked her shirt free and tucked herself in, then glared at Brand.

“I’m not fat!” She spat at him.

“ Shut up!” Klous yelled loud enough to silence the jungle around them for a moment. “We don’t know what the fuck’s out there. We lost one guy already — if you two don’t cut the shit I’ll burn the next one of you that steps outta line and leave you for whatever rats this place has got. Got it?”

Sasha glared at Brand a minute longer, even though he was ignoring her and staring into the jungle. She nodded and adjusted her shirt again, peeling the soaked fabric free of her ample breasts just enough to give Klous a glimpse that burned an image into his mind. She turned and stalked past him, but refused to follow behind Aran.

“ All right, let’s go. Keep your shit together. Nothing got Cooper. He’s just hoping we’ll be a distraction so he can do what he does.”

“ He’s fucking sick,” Sasha muttered.

Klous made sure his face didn’t show that he couldn’t have agreed more.

## Chapter 3

Cooper slipped through the trees silently. He'd expected it to take a while before he had a chance to slip away but chance favored his prepared mind. Klous couldn't keep his eyes off the chubby girl's chest and the others had their own preoccupations. Only Aran was alert, but he'd never paid much attention to Cooper.

Cooper smirked at his brother's actions. Klous had always appreciated the ladies a little too much. He didn't know how to keep a proper distance between himself and them. Not like Cooper had, at least. Klous thought what Cooper did was disgusting but the truth was it kept him safe and sane. It always helped remind him of what was important.

Cooper pulled up short, alerted by a sound ahead of him. It wasn't the distant screeching that he also heard; it was a sound he recognized more intimately — the sound of a bone snapping and of flesh tearing. Unable to fight back the grin that found its way to his face, he moved forward carefully and stepped around a plant with large red tipped thorns.

Ahead of him he saw a small stream that cut across the jungle floor. On the far side of it was the source of the noise. Three creatures were tearing at the body of a forth. He raised his laser rifle slowly and sighted them in, noting that they reminded him a little bit of monkeys that he'd seen pictures of. The dead thing he couldn't identify, it was torn apart too badly.

He put the reticule in his digital scope on each creature, trying to determine which one to shoot first. Pity they weren't human, but this would tide him over. He settled for the one furthest away and waited until he had a perfect shot at the alien creatures head.

It fell back, swatting and beating at the smoking mark on its head. The Vitallian ape howled in pain, causing the other two to look up from their feast. Cooper frowned. All of the rifles on the ship had been modified for maximum burn. He'd even checked to make sure his was set at full power, yet he hadn't burned through the creatures head and into its brain.

He aimed at it again, this time focusing on its face, and pulled the trigger. It felt back, hands reaching for its face as it collapsed. It jerked and thrashed on the ground, hidden behind the dead beast they'd been feasting on. The other two stared at it until one began to look around.

Cooper ducked behind a tree before it could see him, his heart hammering in his chest. They were resistant to his laser, but not invulnerable. The face was less like a monkey and more like a baboon, with a pronounced snout and jaw. More importantly, he suspected, the

face had less fur on it. The fur coat was strange; it seemed to change shades as they moved. Were they some sort of chameleon?

He turned and risked a glance around the edge of the tree. One of them was over inspecting the now still fallen beast. The other had crossed the stream and had its nose up, sniffing the air. Cooper felt his mouth part but kept his gasp hidden. They were a hundred feet away, how could they smell him?

“The heat,” he whispered to himself, realizing the tropical temperatures had him sweating. He’d adapted to it, forgetting about it in his excitement. Now he realized he’d forgotten everything he’d ever learned about hunting. Then again, he’d never hunted animals before, just people. Humans didn’t have the fine senses that animals did.

He looked again and noticed the sharp looking claws on the fingers of the Vitallian monkey. No opposable thumb, but claws and strength that would turn him to shreds in no time. With a fresh surge of adrenaline making his skin tingle, Cooper raised his rifle back into firing position and sighted it in quickly. He aimed for the face this time, hoping to disable it in a single shot.

It saw him moving and let loose a howl. An answering cry came from the other one, but Cooper focused on the more immediate threat. He fired, smelling the heat coming from the over-powered rifle as it generated another invisible beam of energy. The effect was instantaneous, striking the creature and sending it howling and screeching off to the side. He could hear it beating at its face where he’d shot it and occasionally see an arm flap as it rolled and scrambled around on the jungle floor.

The other one was moving fast, charging at him now and closing the distance alarmingly fast. Cooper’s rifle would shoot again, but he risked overheating it and either shutting it down or, more likely, breaking it. He didn’t have time to debate the merits of short term versus long term benefits, instead he snapped off a quick shot that hit the alien baboon on the side. It threw itself to the side, hissing as it did so, and sat up to stare at him. The jaws opened wide, allowing it to scream at him and showed a mouth full of very sharp and dangerous looking teeth.

It lowered itself back to all fours and sprang forward towards him. Cooper gasped and checked his rifle, seeing the display was powered down. It had shut down to prevent a thermal overload. He was fucked.

Cooper looked up at the creature charging at him. The irony washed over him — he’d hunted and killed seventeen people, making them beg and plead with him as he stole the life from them. Now he was going to be ripped apart and eaten by a mere animal. He stepped back from the tree, holding his rifle like a club. He could get in at

least one swing.

The creature was knocked over onto its side, blood spraying from it as it tumbled across the soft jungle ground. Cooper knew his mouth was wide open again. What could have killed it? He looked around frantically. The other one had fled, hurt too badly by his shot he assumed. He looked left and right again, expecting either someone from the Black Hole to step out or...

“ Put your gun down and hands up.”

Cooper felt his stomach ice over at the words. He started to turn his head when he heard the man grunt at him. He lowered his rifle slowly and stood up, hands raised. Movement ahead of him caught his eyes. A man emerged from the jungle shadows, covered in a mixture of some sort of paint and threadbare clothing that served as camouflage.

“ Survivors?” Cooper croaked. He’d found them first, but rather than hunting them they had saved him. He almost laughed.

“ Come down to finish the job?” The man behind him asked.

“ It’s the same ship, Captain.” The man approaching him from the front said. Cooper noted he had a strange looking gun, not an energy weapon, but he couldn’t identify it.

“ Let’s take him back to camp. This is a bad place to ask questions.”

“ Sir, it’s a long walk to have to keep him quiet.”

Cooper turned slowly so he could view both men. The one referred to as Captain had the stance and body language of a man used to being in charge. The other was a little taller and more heavily muscled, but also younger. Both wore what accounted to being little more than scraps of clothing that looked to be barely held together on their very lean frames.

“ Are you the only two?” Cooper dared to ask.

His answer was a rapidly approaching fist that crashed into his temple and knocked him senseless.

## Chapter 4

“ I can’t get over how this place smells!” Sasha’s voice carried a tint of awe as she spoke. She looked up and down the small stream they had found and were now resting at.

“ Smells fine to me,” Brand grunted.

Klous watched his security officer — in reality his chief thug — carefully. The man’s impatience with getting revenge was becoming consuming. He’d picked him up several years back while fencing some salvaged freight. Brand had apparently screwed up something with the organized crime organization he’d been in and needed a new job and a new place to be. Klous had never found out what the crime against the crime lords had been, now he wondered if that should have been more of a priority for him.

“ No, I mean it smells so clean, so fresh, so...”

“ Alive,” Aran finished, drawing surprised attention from the others. “You don’t smell the oil and plastic and synthetic shit that every space station and terra formed world have because of the air scrubbers.”

Klous found himself nodding thoughtfully. “Only Earth had enough natural trees and plants to keep the air breathable, at least it used to. Now this place does... oh yeah, we’re going to be set up great!”

He turned, grinning at the others. He saw expressions that mirrored his own, hope and optimism. It was unusual for him, but it felt good. He felt good, he realized. They’d stopped at the stream to risk a drink and to cool down. Small fish and even some type of tiny shelled creatures lived in it, but they weren’t big enough to be a threat.

“ We’ve been walking for what, three or four hours?” Sasha asked. She was looking down at herself.

“ Yeah, probably,” Klous said, grateful for chance to ogle her chest without fear of discovery. Her shirt — all of their shirts really — were soaked through with sweat. The stop at the stream to drink had recharged them all.

“ I think I’ve lost some weight!”

Brand snorted. “We all have — sweat!”

“ I’m not so sure...”

Klous continued to look at her and realized that she was right. She did look different. A little more curve to her shape and, impossibly, a little more lift to her breasts. It would have been impossible to notice without the humidity and sweat making it stick to her.

“Look at yourselves too!” Sasha said, her eyes going to the others and finally locking with Klouses. “Don’t just stare at my tits.”

Klous felt fresh heat in his cheeks. He ripped his eyes away, understanding he’d been caught, and glanced down at himself. His sweat soaked clothes hung on him, revealing nothing. He shrugged off the utility vest he wore that had spare power cells and other items on it, then pulled his shirt over his head. It stuck to his back, forcing him to grunt and try to contort his arms to pull it free. A tearing sound reached his ears as it slid free.

“Shit,” he muttered, holding the shirt and looking at a large rip in a seam across the back. He heard Sasha gasp as well, drawing his attention back to her. She was staring at his now naked torso, lips parted. Klous glanced down at himself and felt his own jaw go slack. “I’ll be damned,” he muttered. Always lean, the usual layer of padding between skin and muscles had diminished considerably.

“Looking good, Captain,” Sasha said with red cheeks.

“I took my shirt off...”

Sasha’s eyes widened and Aran barked out a laugh. Another screech from downstream stole the humor from the moment. It was answered a moment later then silence followed. Klous tossed his shirt to the ground and slipped his vest back on. He picked up his rifle from where it lay against a tree. “Come on, too many of those things out there around us, no sense in waiting for them to find us.”

“I think they already did,” Brand said, staring across the stream.

Klous jerked his head up and followed Brand’s stare. The trees of the jungle were wide, most twice as thick as a man or more. The undergrowth was minimal once away from the stream, though moss seemed to grow almost anywhere. Only an occasional beam of direct sunlight broke through the canopy of leaves, but the ambient light was enough in spite of that to let them see unobstructed through the unevenly spaced out trees.

What he saw confused him. It took several seconds to make sense of it and even then he doubted his eyes. A creature of some sort, taller than a man, but covered in some sort of an iridescent sheen. It stood on two legs, but not like a man. It reminded him of a wingless bird. Instead of wings it had arms — arms that ended in three long claws designed for tearing. The head was the worst. A cross between a bird and an animal, it had a beak that opened and closed, a long tongue sticking out each time as though to taste the air. He could see glints of white inside the beak, no doubt proof of teeth just as dangerous as the claws.

“What the hell is that?” Klous muttered aloud.

“Welcoming committee?” Aran hissed.

Sasha could only curse as she stared at it. Repeatedly.

“Don’t move!” Brand barked, trying to keep his voice low. “I saw something once about animals like this. They don’t see so well unless their prey is moving.”

“When’d you see animals like this?” Klous challenged.

“Well, not like this, but hunters. History chips from Earth.”

“I don’t think Earth ever had anything like this!” Klous muttered.

“Dinosaurs,” Aran said.

“Great. Okay, what do we do? It’s big but we’re all armed.”

Brand raised his rifle up slowly. The monster lowered its head slightly, turning it so that both its cold eyes stared at him. “Shoot it or run like hell. Remember you only got to be faster than the slowest person.”

Klous swore at the macabre humor and hefted his gun up. The beast roared, convinced by their sudden movement that they were worth eating. Their guns discharged, each announced only by the near silent hum of the capacitors as they released and recharged. One beam struck a tree near the monster, blackening the trunk and making smoke and steam curl off of it. Three others hit it, causing explosions of fur or feathers or whatever the shimmering material was the beast had. It roared again and charged forward, rocketing at them and bouncing off the trees as it struggled to get to them.

“Plan B!” Klous shouted. He fired again and turned to run. Brand was already running, following his own advice. Aran fired twice more, then cursed as his rifle shutdown on him to prevent overheating. Sasha scrambled and tripped on the bank of the stream.

“Come on!” Klous snarled at her, reaching down and grabbing her arm. He hauled her up easily, adrenaline coursing through him and overriding the slippery grip the sweat on her arm caused. Sasha hissed in pain but remained silent.

Each thudding step of the creature behind them sounded louder and closer. Klous dared not look back. Still he pulled at Sasha, forcing her to keep up with him. A shout from behind him made him stumble but he caught himself. It was Aran’s voice he heard. Not a shout of pain but a primal scream. The beast returned the roar. Klous could smell the fetid breath from the creature.

## Chapter 5

Sasha whimpered beside him before he realized how hard he was panting as well. He risked a glance behind him and saw nothing was behind them. All signs of the beast were gone. He slowed and pulled up short, forcing Sasha to slow with him. They looked around, breathing hard.

“Where is it?” Sasha finally gasped.

“Aran drew it away,” Klous said. “Or it got him.”

Sasha’s mouth gaped open, no words coming out. She trembled and fell to her knees, hugging her arms around herself. Klous noticed how the pose boosted her chest up and, being below him, he could easily see down her shirt. He ripped his focus away. The last thing they needed right now was him worrying about screwing her.

“Where are we?” Sasha asked a few moments later.

Klous looked around, realizing that in their mad dash he’d lost all track of where they were. Not that he’d had much of an idea before, but with all of them together he assumed they could backtrack themselves at least. Now the thought of trying to follow their trail back seemed suicidal. There was a massive beast waiting for them, something that treated an overcharged laser rifle blast as though it was sunburn.

“You’re in a pot of boiling water, one step away from being called shit stew.”

Klous swung around while Sasha cried out in surprise. A man stood there, a worn plasma rifle held in his hand and some other weapon slung across his back. He was wearing a mixture of some sort of body paint, some animal fur or hide, and boots that had seen better days.

“Who’re you, old man?” Klous asked.

“Funny, since I been here I been feeling younger and better every day,” The man said. “Now you shut the hell up unless I ask you something.”

Klous glanced at Sasha, then shrugged. “Two of us, you think you can take us?”

“Shit, I don’t even need my guns,” he said, stepping forward. “You toss yours down and maybe you’ll get out of this alive.”

Klous noted how he moved, picking his feet up and walking carefully but smoothly. He was at home on the uneven and occasionally slippery jungle floor. The muscles that stood out through the camouflaging paint on his arms showed that the man might have been strong enough to wrestle the giant creature that had chased them.

Klous considered his options. The stranger was most likely one of the survivors from the Rented Mule. He wondered if he was the source of military influence that Brand had suspected.

“ Klous!” Sasha hissed.

He glanced at her sharply, irritated at the distraction. He saw she’d already tossed her rifle away from her. Like it mattered, she couldn’t shoot the damn thing straight. “Got a name?” Klous asked, pulling his own rifle off slowly and then tossing it to the ground.

“ Yeah,” He answered without offering it. “Now move back.” He waited until both Sasha and Klous had stepped back several paces before he gathered up their rifles. He checked them over and grunted. “Yep, same sons of bitches that tried to board us. If I could fly it myself I’d shoot you dead and take your ship for myself right now, but I can’t. Come on, let’s go. You walk in front of me. Try anything and I shoot you. You run and you’re on your own. That overgrown chicken chasing you? That’s not the biggest or the baddest thing around here.”

“ Klous, what about-“

“ Sasha, shut it,” Klous snapped at her. “Let’s go, stay between us.”

“ Good idea,” he said, then pointed off into the jungle. “Now move your ass that way!”

Klous tried to talk twice more before angry outbursts from their captor convinced him he was wasting his time and, according to the stranger, endangering them. He walked where he was told, all the while wondering how he could trick their captor into doing something stupid so he could get one of their rifles back or, better yet, get his hands on the plasma rifle the man carried.

Twice they stopped and waited, the first time Klous and Sasha exchanged confused looks. The second it was apparent when a group of two legged animals ran across their path several yards ahead of them. A moment later the fleeing animals were pursued by four beasts that Klous thought might have been related to terrestrial cats, except they possessed six legs. The pirate captain judged them to be only a little taller at their back than his hips. The way they moved and pounced, he knew he’d be hard pressed to go against one without at least a gun.

Less than an hour after the run-in with the six legged cats they were ordered to stop. “This is it, grab that rope and start climbing.”

Klous and Sasha looked at each other and then around. Finally she stepped forward and gestured at a vine hanging from a tree. Their captor grunted. Klous moved up to another one and took it. He studied it, noticing that it wasn’t a vine after all, but a bunch of fibers woven together to make a rope that looked just like a vine. Together they looked up and, together, they gasped in surprise.

Over two dozen feet up they saw rope and wood bridges connecting the trees together and offering paths between them. The trees had portions of them hollowed out, though from the ground they could see little more than shadows within the openings.

“ Welcome to Treetown,” he snapped. “Now quit gawking and get your asses up there!”

## Chapter 6

“ Can’t believe how alive this place is,” Lizzie said, glancing up from her station to look over at Ling. “How’s JimBob coming?”

The mountainous man seemed to ignore her, so intent was he on the controls at the weapons station. Finally he grunted before looking up at her. “Standing by,” he said, his rare smile reaching his Asian eyes. “He’s unarmed, but that’s just a simple command.”

“ He scares me,” Lizzie admitted, then she sucked her piercings between her teeth to nibble on.

Ling laughed. “He scares all of us! Well, maybe not Cooper...”

Lizzie gave him a look that communicated her thoughts of Cooper clearer than words. “Anyhow, there’s so much life on this planet it’s hard to get good readings. Thermal sensors are overloaded and there’s some weird fields down here distorting everything anyhow.”

“ Weird fields?” Ling asked.

“ Yeah, I can’t isolate and exclude them, it’s across every spectrum. Nothing dangerous, just noise.”

“ Visuals still work?”

Lizzie fed the commands into her station and a moment later the main display lit up with a segmented view of twelve different cameras, some of which pointed out to the ocean, others into the sky, and a few down to the sandy beach beneath the Black Hole. “Yeah, nothing exciting though...”

“ Want to bet?” Ling stared at the display as a figure burst free from the jungle several hundred feet down the shore from where the rest of the crew had gone in. “Is that...Aran?”

“ What’s...why is he...oh shit! What is that?”

Ling ignored her. He’d seen the same thing, the beast burst free of the jungle behind him, stumbling as it tried to adapt to the sandy ground. It picked itself up from the small ditch it had dug as it fell and shook its head, roared, and charged after Aran anew.

“ Open the door!” Lizzie shouted. “Shit Ling, let him in! Turn JimBob on! Do something!”

“ Trying,” he snapped, working furiously at the weapons station.

Lizzie stared at the screens, horrified at the size and raw ferocity of the beast that chased Aran. On the open ground it easily closed the distance between the two of them, promising a gruesome end to the man with less than a hundred yards remaining between them. Lizzie wanted to look away but couldn’t, even though she knew what she was about to see would plague her dreams for years.

“ Got it!”

Lizzie jerked, surprised by Ling’s triumphant shout. She didn’t

turn to look at him, disaster was too close on the screen. The beast lunged forward, opening its beaked maw and snapping it towards its next meal. Aran dove to the ground, not slowing in the least. Lizzie wondered how he knew when to duck but couldn't voice the question before it was answered for her.

The external feeds picked up the beast roaring as tufts of its hide burst free. Smoking black marks appeared on its body, explaining how Aran had known to duck. He hadn't been avoiding the creature; he'd been avoiding JimBob's line of fire.

Aran was moving still. He crawled, occasionally favoring his leg and side. He picked himself up slowly and lurched towards the ship in a staggering run. The beast ignored him, realizing that the new threat was something else.

Lizzie and Ling watched the creature charge the robot down. The robot held its ground — fear emulation programming wasn't popular on combat or security models. The skin on the creature was blistered and split open, leaking blood and fluids in places from the powerful pulse lasers, but it still came on and smashed JimBob to the side with one swipe of a heavily muscled forelimb. The sentinel tried to right itself when it came to a rest, rotating its torso in an attempt to let the heavy tracks it used for ambulation to tilt it over. Before it could find success the beak slammed into it, grabbing and tearing one of the twin barreled arms off of it. The scorching metal was spit out as it determined the taste wasn't to its liking. Another swipe with clawed talons sent sparks and smoke leaping from JimBob, then the prehistoric behemoth picked a large foot up slammed it down, crushing the sentinel 'bot beyond repair.

Ling swore, signaling the JB1201 was destroyed. Lizzie stared as Aran made it onto another camera view, this one beneath the ship, and then he limped up the open ramp to the cargo bay. Lizzie was about to bark for Ling to shut it when Aran apparently hit the manual controls inside, sealing the doors shut.

Just in time, the beast slammed into them and dented the thick metal of the bay doors. It roared again and smashed against it with head and arms. Its attack was senseless and violent, fueled by frustration and pain. Moments later its abuse found the camera housing and shattered the concealed unit, blacking out the image on the screen.

“That thing's really pissed off,” Ling observed.

“What is it?” Lizzie whispered. She realized it was crazy, but she was afraid to talk too loud for fear it might hear her. She could hear the distant echoes of the abuse it was unleashing on the Black Hole both through the external speakers and the echoes from inside the ship.

“ Some kind of fucking dinosaur!”

Lizzie and Ling both turned to see Aran stagger onto the bridge. He limped over to his station, clutching his side. “What happened to you? Did it hurt you?” Lizzie blurted.

“ Fucker kicked me when I went down, sent me rolling,” he said through gritted teeth.

“ Are you all right?”

“ Do I look all right? Broke my fucking ribs and damn near dislocated my hip!”

“ Hey, it stopped!” Ling interrupted, holding up his hand for added effect.

“ Did it give up?” Lizzie hoped aloud.

Aran stared at the display screen, searching each camera image carefully. “Seemed smarter than that,” he said finally. “I don’t-“

He was interrupted by the sound of metal being struck then bending. The Black Hole shifted, slowly at first, then rapidly as whatever happened succumbed to the damage it had taken. All three fell from the chairs to the deck as the ship angled and slammed into the ground. Alarms went off throughout the bridge, lights flashing and klaxons sounding.

“ What the fuck?” Aran shouted.

Lizzie screamed, no words, just raw terror. She curled into a ball and slid beneath her station, rocking herself and sucking on her lip piercings so hard she could taste blood.

“ It knocked out a landing strut,” Ling said a moment later, breaking through Lizzie’s panic induced fugue. “Son of a bitch tore out a landing strut! We’ve got minor breeches, just enough for atmosphere loss, and all sorts of damage to electrical and hydraulic systems.”

“ What about that...that thing?” Lizzie asked, pulling herself together enough to uncurl from her fetal position. She stared around, expecting a great gash in the wall of the bridge to open up and the fanged beak to reach in and snatch her out.

“ I don’t know,” Ling responded. The display was out, the short distance crash having shorted out the connections to it. “But we’re okay...for now.”

Aran swore and pulled himself back into the pilot’s chair that was bolted to the floor. He swiveled in it to account for the canted angle of the ship and rubbed his hip. “Can we fix it?”

Ling glanced at Lizzie, letting her see the hopelessness in his eyes. It caused a chill to go down her spine, but she managed a weak smile in spite of it for him. Ling had always been nice to her. He’d talked to her and even helped her with one of her piercings. The least she could do was show him a little support.

“ Where are the others?” Ling asked, turning back to him.

Aran grunted. "No idea. We got separated when that thing came at us. I thought maybe Cooper made it back here, he disappeared earlier."

Lizzie felt as much as heard the breath suck through her teeth. Cooper was bad news, especially if he was unsupervised. Nobody knew exactly what was off about him but the rumors were that he either liked being rough with his women or something far, far worse.

"Without Sasha it'll take a long time," Ling let his concern tinge his voice. Lizzie felt her stomach twist, then she clamped down on it. Sasha was her crewmate too, she should be just as upset if something happened to her. Lizzie's concerns unnoticed, Ling continued, "Can fix just about all the electrical shorts. Most of the hydraulics too probably. Hull breaches maybe, but not without us being in a proper dock. No way of getting in one either, not without some major equipment."

"Couldn't we fire the reaction thrusters or something?"

Ling glanced at Lizzie again. This time she saw a thoughtful and, maybe, even a hopeful light in his wide open eyes. "Yeah...yeah, that might work. We' have to be real careful, then figure out how to rig up a temporary strut to have in place, and figure out how to get it there, but there's a chance. Maybe one in a hundred, but I've had worse."

"Get started!"

"You're not Captain Hildebrand." Lizzie saw Ling's back straighten and his shoulders rise.

"No, but I'm second in command and after what we all just saw, we have to accept that the Captain won't be returning."

Lizzie whimpered, then clamped her hand over her mouth. She never had been very good at dealing with death and violence. Being squeamish was bad for someone who served on a ship that specialized in forced salvage operations, but Klous liked her and made sure he kept her clear of anything that got messy.

Ling nodded after a moment. "I'll get started because that's what the Captain would want. I'm not trying anything that might make it worse until we know, for sure, whether he's coming back or not."

Aran scowled. "Fine, but if we don't hear from him in twenty four hours you've got your answer."

"Fine."

Lizzie looked back and forth between them. She thought about crawling back under her desk but decided instead to suck a lip piercing between her teeth. Ling looked at her and offered a weak smile. She tried, and failed to return it. He nodded towards her station and she nodded in return. She was no engineer but she knew enough about emergency electronics that she could help. She keyed in some quick tests to run on the system and frowned at how quick the results

came back. They had a lot of work to do, if what her diagnostics and what Ling said were even halfway accurate.

## Chapter 7

“Tarn, who’s this?”

The muscle bound man guarding Klous and Sasha turned his head to watch another man stride quickly and confidently across one of the rope bridges to the hollow in the tree that they sat in. The new man was thinner but still had the look of someone who was lean and dangerous.

“Said their names were Klous and Sasha. She called him Captain.”

The new arrival walked over to stare at Sasha and then Klous. He lashed out, driving his fist into Klous’s jaw and rocking the surprised man’s head back. Sasha yelled and jumped to her feet. Klous shook his head to clear it and tested with his tongue to see if anything had been knocked loose. Some blood was all he found. “What’s that for?”

“That’s for shooting up my ship! We wouldn’t be trapped here if it wasn’t for you!” He snarled.

“You must be the Captain of the Rented Mule.”

“Jonathon Sharp,” He said, nodding. “Except the Mule is a submersible these days. Again, thanks to you.”

“You let us go and you can join my crew,” Klous offered.

Tarn glanced at his Captain. Sharp just snorted. “Not interested in losing my title. Easier for us to just take your ship and leave you here.”

Sasha gasped beside him, but Klous ignored her. “Sasha, sit down, you’re making our new friends nervous.”

Tarn smirked but did not let the barrel of his energy rifle move a fraction of an inch from where it pointed at her. Sasha returned to the carved wooden stump with an unhappy groan. Klous stared at Sharp. “All right, let us go and we’ll take you to a port back in the rim systems. We’ve got plenty of extra chambers after your people killed several of my men.”

“Next time I’m going to have Tarn hit you,” Sharp said. “You’re here, now get used to it. Expect a high protein diet, unless I decide to have you killed.”

“You don’t strike me as the killing type,” Klous dared to say.

“I’m not, but I wouldn’t push me if I were you. I already don’t like you.”

“What was that thing?” Sasha interrupted. “It was...”

“Big? Scary? About to eat you? Right on all accounts,” Sharp said. She nodded. “We’ve killed a couple of them when we have to, but mostly we try to avoid them. Been calling them Chickasaurus because we don’t know what else to use.”

Klous snorted at the ludicrous name. "A dinosaur chicken?"

"They got beaks and feathers. Plenty of muscle but something that big on too legs that can move that fast? Even here that's not normal. Their bones are light too, just like a bird. So yeah, a dinosaur chicken."

"Feathers?"

"Thick hollow hair or some kind of feathers, it reflects light. Makes energy weapons less effective, keeps 'em cool in the sun, and adds some camouflage so they can hide or hunt better," Tarn said.

"No wings though, they can't get up here?" Klous peered out to the rope bridge thoughtfully.

"Don't worry, there's plenty of nasty critters that live in the trees around here too. We got most of 'em scared of us but we still post guards at night." Sharp turned away from them to look out the opening of the tree. He returned a moment later. "You seen enough to know your odds of surviving out there on your own are close to zero. You going to play nice or try to kill us in our sleep?"

"Nice is my middle name," Klous said with a smile.

Sharp sighed. "Never trust a man with a four letter name," he said. "All right, Tarn keep em quiet, I think Kira's back."

"Tarn's name is four letters," Klous muttered.

Sharp glanced at the former Marine then returned his gaze to Klous. "Yep, best you keep that in mind."

Klous smirked then tried to see out the opening at the approaching newcomer. Another woman always interested him. He glanced at Sasha and saw she was staring at the floor hunched over. Her shirt hung from her loosely, giving him ample amount of shadowed flesh to view from where he sat. He realized with a barely suppressed start that she had changed again. Sasha always wore loose fitting clothes but now hers were practically falling off of her.

"What is this place?" He wondered aloud, glancing at his own arm and noting the added definition he could see in it.

"You drank the water?" Tarn asked with a chuckle. Klous found himself nodding his head as he looked at the big man. "I used to be FIST a lifetime ago. Got old and fat and sloppy. Nine months here and I'm in better shape than I ever was. Feel younger too. This place is a fucking meatgrinder, but you gotta be tough here to stand a chance at surviving."

"Working out a lot to stay alive here?" Klous wasn't sure what Tarn was saying. The environment was so hostile the former Marine had to work harder?

Tarn laughed, then turned and spit out the open door to the ground below. "No. Well, just living here is a work out. I mean there's something in the water or the air or the food we eat here. It helps

keep you strong. Wounds heal faster, fat burns off, it's just good for you — if it don't kill you."

Klous frowned as he digested Tarn's words. Not only would the planet make a wonderful resort getaway or hunter's paradise, but if they could identify what it was that was so good for the human body, it could be bottled and sold at any price! He realized he was grinning and wiped the smile off his face before Tarn noticed it.

"You think I look good, wait till you see Kira!" The man let his grin slip before he said a little more quietly. "Walk soft around her. She's helped keep us safe and sane and put up with being the only woman on the planet, but she's got a special hate on for people that cause her friends a rough time."

The sound of footsteps on the wooden planks of the bridge kept Klous quiet. He wanted to ask for more from Tarn, but knew he didn't dare. If he had an unlikely ally in the former FIST he didn't want to strain the relationship prematurely.

Sasha looked up as well, staring at the opening until Captain Sharp reentered and behind him came the most spectacular thing he had ever seen.

"That's Kira," Tarn said before he laughed at the expression on Klous's face.

The woman named Kira stopped and stared at him, a flash of recognition and then irritation crossing her face. Klous barely caught it, he was more interested in the rest of her body.

Kira's hair was pulled back into a single reddish brown braid that ran halfway down her back. Her outfit consisted of a loose fitting shirt that had been turned into nothing more than a halter top. It offered no support to her breasts but it didn't need to — they stood proudly on her chest defying gravity in a way that threatened to turn into an embarrassing dream for him the next time he went to sleep. Instead of pants she wore a skirt that showed signs of being hand sewn or at least patched by hand more than a few times. It was loose as well and fell a few inches above her knees. Below that she wore footwear that was laced around and above her ankles, but otherwise made out of some animal hide. Her exposed skin, which there was a lot of, was covered in the various shades of paint the others wore to make them blend in.

What took his breath away wasn't just Kira's breasts, it was her entire body. Her muscle tone was clearly evident in spite of the paint, including a clear definition of her abdominal muscles beneath her makeshift halter. There was absolutely nothing soft about the woman, yet she was undeniably feminine and attractive. Even the barrel of the ballistic rifle she now pointed at him did not detract from his sudden desire to see more of her.

“Kira!” Sharp barked at her. She stayed firm for a long moment, then slowly raised her rifle and slipped it back around her shoulder. She also had a stick across her back held in place by a string that crossed her chest. Klous noted how the string slid between her boobs and fantasized about trading places with it.

“Kira’s a little upset about how we got here,” Sharp explained. “She’s had a bit of a rough ride and since a lot of this is your fault, I don’t think I need to tell you how high up you are on her shit list.”

He leaned forward and grinned. “I’m a reasonable man but Kira, well, Kira is the killing type.”

Klous looked at Kira again and saw her eyes held nothing but a total lack of mercy. He fought the shudder and, without thinking, muttered, “Deadly beauty.”

Sharp laughed at the words. He backed up and nodded. “Good description! Now then, things just got a little more interesting, and a lot worse off for you.”

“What? Why?” Sasha blurted out. Klous glanced at her and saw that she was thrusting her own chest out. Hers was bigger than Kira’s, and even if it was looking a lot more promising since they’d landed on Vitalis, there was no comparison between the two women.

“Your ship just got wrecked,” Sharp said. “That same critter that attacked you chased one of your men to the beach. He made it back to the ship but the Chickasaurus got angry and started pounding the hell out of it. Tore up a sentinel robot you had too, I guess. Then when it couldn’t get in it turned away and walked right into one of your landing struts. Kira watched the whole thing. I guess it got pissed off about that so it went after the strut and bent it just enough to make it snap. Then your ship crashed down on top of it.”

“My ship?” Klous whispered. The news stunned him. “It can be fixed! We’ve had harder bumps in space against rocks or docking.”

Kira shook her head, smiling viciously for the first time. “My man is watching it still. We heard internal breeches, alarms and atmospheric exchanges. Clouds are rolling in from the sea, looks like a big storm. The waves will pound it and it will be scrap metal before morning.”

“Your man?” Klous asked, irritated that any man could claim her. The fact that concern over her had taken higher priority than concern for his ship didn’t occur to him.

“Yes, my engineer, Eric” Sharp slipped in before she could respond. “Seems this planet doesn’t like outsiders and those that do make it here it doesn’t let go of. We should get what we can from your ship before it gets ruined.”

“Eric?” Klous echoed. Eric was the name of the man that he’d been after for the bounty. He looked at Kira again, wondering if she

had any idea about the bounty on her man's head. Not that it mattered now, but if he could find a way off the planet and take them with him...

"Hey! Stop staring at her like that, she'd pull your guts out with her hand before she'd think about screwing you," Sharp snapped, pulling Klous out of another daydream. "Now answer my damn question! Are you going to cooperate?"

Klous nodded slowly, replaying the scene in his head to piece together what he'd missed. Sharp had asked for them to play nice so they didn't have to worry about shooting them. "If we're really stuck here, we might as well be on the same team."

Kira snorted under her breath, but Klous fought hard — and won — to ignore her. "All right," Sharp said, motioning for them to stand up. "Let's head out."

"Head out?" Sasha asked.

"To the Black Hole," Klous answered her. "We'll see if it's as bad as they say and hook up with Ling and Lizzie, and whoever made it back."

"Then what?" Sasha asked.

"Then we get off this rock if we can, otherwise we start salvaging."

"Salvaging?"

Sharp chuckled. "Figured you'd know all about salvage operations."

Klous nodded and smiled wryly. "Fair enough, Captain." He turned to Sasha and offered his hand to her. She looked up, startled. "Get that sexy ass of your moving, Sasha, we've got a long day ahead of us."

"Day?" Kira barked. "Time we get there the sun will be setting behind the clouds. It'll be so dark you can't see ten feet and that's when the nighttime predators come out."

Sasha took a step closer to Klous. He glanced at her with his eyebrow raised but she only stared at Kira. Kira spun around, her skirt lifting enough to show a teasing glimpse of thigh, and walked quickly back down the plank.

"One more thing," Sharp said. "We've got another one of your men, guy named Cooper?"

Klous jerked in surprise. Sasha gasped beside him. "Where is he?"

"Tied up and under guard. We carried him back here and when he woke up he convinced us he'd work with us, then he tried to take out Jeff. He might have won too if Jeff hadn't spent the past nine months on this place. You learn to grow eyes in the back of your head here."

Klous sighed. "I'll talk to him."

“ Later, after we get back.”

“ Sharp, don’t underestimate Cooper, later might be too late,” Klous warned. Sasha nodded beside him.

Sharp chuckled. “I’ll take the risk. He resists again and Jeff puts him down.”

Klous frowned but nodded. Sharp and his men still had the guns, after all. “All right, let’s get to the Hole.”

## Chapter 8

Brand leapt over a root, convinced he could still hear the pounding feet of the beast behind him. His toe snagged against it, throwing him forward and causing him to crash face first into a mound of dirt. It sounded hollow but was resilient enough to make him bounce off of it.

Blood ran down his face, mixing with the sweat and stinging his eyes. He groaned and rolled away, staring behind him and expecting massive jaws to clamp shut on him at any moment. Instead he found himself alone in the jungle. Alone and exhausted.

Brand wiped the sweat and blood from his face. He gasped for air and looked for his laser rifle. He crawled over to it and picked it up, noting that it had cooled down and come back online. He felt better, even if the creature that had chased them all had proven stronger than the energy weapon. He sat there a few moments longer catching his breath, then glanced up and saw that he was in a section of the jungle that seemed less dense with trees.

It was brighter, but that also meant hotter. He could see insects flying above, insects that he could not identify in spite of the fact that they were larger than any bug he'd ever heard of or seen. Far up in the branches he saw movement as well, a multi-limbed creature was slowly moving about, stalking some unseen prey or seeking shelter. Brand didn't know or care, as long as it stayed away from him. On the jungle floor undergrowth sprouted upwards, reaching for the faint promise of sunlight far above.

He jerked his hand, feeling a sudden tickle on it. Looking down he saw another insect, this one half as big as his foot. It was multi-segmented and possessed multiple legs, as well as some wicked looking mandibles. With a curse he jumped up and away from it and leveled his laser rifle at it.

He stabbed the trigger and stared, uncomprehending, as the large bug continued unharmed. At that range and with his experience he knew he couldn't have missed. He yanked the trigger again twice before glancing at it and noticing that the gun had gone back off line. A faint smell of burnt electronics reached his nose. He tossed the gun aside and cursed, then looked at the bug again.

The bug that had touched him was only the first of many. A line of them approached and fanned out, coming towards him without fear or concern for their own safety. His delay while trying to work the rifle had only given them more time to approach and surround him. He swore again and turned to run, but found his ankle had been twisted by the earlier fall and wouldn't support the sudden movement.

Brand grunted and tried to pull himself away, flailing with his feet as he did so. One of the bugs grabbed and bit through his boot and into his foot. Brand screamed, first in fear and then in pain as some sort of burning venom entered his foot. He pushed harder to get away, smashing the bug that had bitten him in the process.

He scrambled onto his hands and knees, then tried to rise up but a growing numbness in the bitten foot left him off balance. He rolled onto his side and into a patch of flowered grass. The pollen stunk and made his eyes water, causing a sneezing fit at first, then a swelling of his sinuses and throat as anaphylactic shock set in. He labored to breathe, forgetting momentarily about the swarm of insects that were climbing onto his legs.

They bit him anew, drawing fresh attempts to scream for help from him. His cries were raspy, limited by his restricted air flow. He beat at them with his hands until they, too, were covered with the clinging and biting bugs. Brand continued to wheeze for help as the bugs swarmed over his body and into his open mouth, seeking the hot moisture within.

It never occurred to him that his vow for vengeance had failed. Not only had he not killed the crew of the Rented Mule but he hadn't even made it past the inhabitants of the planet to find them.

## Chapter 9

After the forced march through the jungle to Treetown, Klous was surprised to find himself not only ready for more hiking, but better suited to it. A glance at Sasha showed that she felt similarly. Further glances proved that her shirt was definitely in danger of falling off of one or both of her shoulders. He kept checking just to make sure.

When not sneaking glances at Sasha, Klous tried to follow Kira as she floated through the jungle at the head of the group. Tarn was behind them, carrying the heaviest ordinance, and Sharp was between Klous and Kira. Sharp didn't foil the view so much as Kira's pace left the others behind. They would come upon her waiting for them from time to time, impatience stamped upon her face.

In what Klous considered record time they reached the beach. He was winded but found himself recovering quickly. The recaptured breath slipped out of him when he looked down the beach to his damaged ship.

"My ship!" He gasped.

"I don't think Ling and I can fix that," Sasha muttered.

Klous ignored her and started forward. Sharp caught his arm and stopped him. He pointed out to sea. "See those clouds coming? Bringing in a mother of a storm and the sun's already behind 'em about to set. We'll need to hurry or be caught in it and trust me, you don't want to be caught in a storm like that."

"We can wait it out in the Hole," Sasha suggested.

Tarn laughed, drawing Klous and Sasha's attention. He shook his head and adjusted one of the strange weapons on his back that Klous couldn't identify. Sharp interpreted for him, "Your ship is going to be pounded by waves like you've never seen."

Tarn was quick to add, "Gotta get what we can off it while we can, shit breaks down fast here. Never know if these guns are going to work next time we try 'em even though we field strip 'em daily."

"That why you're carrying different weapons too?" Klous asked.

"Took some trial and error but yeah, modern day crossbows, Kira made herself a regular longbow, straight out of Robin Hood!"

"Robin who?" Sasha asked.

Klous waved her off. The name sounded familiar to him but it wasn't important. He did know what a bow and arrow was, he'd just never seen a real one. For that matter, he realized, he'd never seen a lot of things. "I've never seen a wave," Klous admitted, unconvinced. "How could water hurt my ship?"

Sharp chuckled. "Fair enough. It hits harder than you'd expect. Lot of weight and power behind it, kind of like crashing into the

ground every time you get hit. You'll have to trust me, being trapped in there is the last place you want to be."

"There's holes in the ship and after the beating it's going to take, there'll be more."

Klous turned to the new voice and saw a short man walking up to them from the edge of the jungle. His hair was longer and he had a few days worth of stubble growing on his face, but Klous recognized him from the pictures of the bounty he was after. "Eric?" He asked.

Eric stopped and stared at him. His eyes went to Kira first, then Captain Sharp and Tarn. Kira stepped in, moving faster than any person had a right to, and drove her fist into his stomach. Klous doubled over, air and spittle bursting from his mouth. His face met her raised knee, snapping his head back and crunching his nose.

Klous lay gasping on the ground, though he couldn't remember exactly how he'd gotten there. He felt himself yanked to the side and onto his back. A bloodstained knee slammed into his chest and pinned him to the ground, then a sharp and cold edge pressed against his throat.

"Kira!"

Klous heard her being called off but it took a moment for the words to register. It wasn't until he saw hands pulling her free of him that he realized he might live to see the next day. He reached up gingerly to his nose, feeling the blood that flowed from it. He spat, noting his teeth felt numb and his lips were bleeding as well, but nothing was missing.

"Told you she was something," Tarn said through a grin. He grabbed Klous's hand and pulled him up.

Klous teetered on his feet for a moment, dizzy from the trauma to his head and still winded. When he looked up he realized that Kira, Sharp, and Eric were having an intense moment of barely hushed conversation only a few feet away.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Klous said loud enough so he could hear himself over the ringing in his head. "I figured it was a man, but you can make the displays show just about anything."

Kira started forward but Sharp grabbed her arm and held her back. "What's this?"

"I heard tell of a rich bounty on your ship, Captain," Klous said, turning to look Sharp in the eyes. "Deal was I got whatever salvage I wanted and half the bounty. There'd be an inside man on the ship making sure it went smooth. You're the inside man. What happened, you didn't figure on falling for him?"

Klous saw Sharp's hand clamp down hard on Kira's arm, expecting her reaction. Instead of her pulling away Kira stared at him with murder in her eyes for a long moment, then she nodded. She

turned away and yanked her arm free of Sharp's grip. She looked at Eric for a moment then stormed past him towards the Black Hole.

Klous saw Eric turn from staring at Kira to look at him. Klous held up his hand. "I've been hit enough by you people today, do it tomorrow."

Eric shook his head and turned away to walk after Kira. Sharp looked at him, studying him carefully much as he'd done earlier in Treetown. "You really know how to make friends," He said finally, then turned and headed after the others.

Tarn chuckled again, then clapped him on the back. "Don't worry, nose'll heal fast here. Just watch your back around Kira."

"She was going to kill you all!" Sasha blurted out. "Why isn't anyone pissed at her?"

"Kira ain't what you think she is," Tarn said with a shrug. "Ain't my story to tell, but she's a special girl. I didn't give her credit for a while neither, but she showed me up plenty of times. Don't underestimate her. She was a lot happier and nicer before you guys showed up. I'd appreciate it if you got along with her and made her happy again."

Klous released the pinch grip on his nose. He sniffed a few times to make sure the bleeding had stopped before saying, "What, you don't want her going off on you?"

"Hell no I don't!" Tarn chuckled. He shook his head and turned towards the crashed pirate ship. He turned back, a grin on his face. "Hey! How bad did my plasma cannons fuck your ship up? I almost forgot about that, you guys hit our sensors."

"Fucked up a bank of attitude thrusters and overloaded our weapons system," Klous spat out more blood before he started walking after the others. He was grateful for the distracting conversation Tarn provided. Dealing with the confusing dynamic between the crew of the Rented Mule promised to make the ringing in his head worse than ever.

They fell silent as they closed on the broken ship. Klous could see damage to the hull that would take weeks in a shipyard to fix. Just lifting it back off the beach to repair the ruined strut alone was an impossible task without an army of machinery and people. He swallowed the bitterness in his throat, tasting blood as much as bile.

Tarn barked out a laugh as they walked around the edge of the ruined spaceship, one of the legs of the chिकासaurus was sticking out from beneath the hull. Klous stared at it then he, too, felt something slip loose inside of him. He chuckled and said, "Wait till I get another starship, I'll come back for the rest of your family!"

## Chapter 10

“Where’s Cooper?” Klous said after they’d fought through what was turning into a monsoon to return to Treetown. He’d forced himself to move on after seeing the damages to the Black Hole. Aran and Ling’s plan to fire the reaction thrusters to make the ship hover while a new strut was put in place had been a neat idea, but impractical. The back-blast from the thrusters would roast anyone standing under the ship even if they did have time to repair the ship enough to try it. Already the waves were breaking and lapping at the edge of the ship. Eric had mentioned something about high tide coming in as well, whatever a tide was.

All that remained for Klous was finding out how his younger brother was doing. Or whether or not Cooper had managed the impossible yet again and turned the tables on his captor. Brand was still an unknown factor, but as more time passed the certainty that he’d met an untimely end grew greater as well.

“Come on, let’s get this over with,” Sharp sat the large bag full of miscellaneous plunder from the Black Hole down in the hollow of a tree. Klous saw him catch Tarn’s eye and glance at the others. Tarn nodded.

“We’re stuck here too,” Klous said. “We’re not going to do anything stupid.”

“You’ve got a history of stupid,” Sharp pointed out. “First attacking us then coming here. You try being less stupid for a while and maybe I’ll start believing you.”

Klous fought the urge to lash out. He wasn’t in charge anymore and it bugged him. He nodded shortly and turned to the four remaining members of his crew. “Stay together and don’t do anything-”

“Stupid?” Sasha rolled her eyes at him. Klous fought the bitter urge to chuckle. Lizzie tried, and failed, to smile. Aran and Ling grunted and nodded, respectively, and started going through the equipment they’d returned with.

Klous followed Sharp across the slippery wooden bridge. Rainwater fell almost as heavily as though they weren’t sheltered by a thick jungle canopy overhead. Even breezes whipped through the trees, a testimony to the ferocity of the storm that had come upon them as they were leaving the Black Hole behind. He glanced back at one point and saw Kira following them, her pace determined and quicker than their own.

“You going to break my nose again?” Klous had to almost shout to be heard over the loud cadence of wind and water.

“ I’m going to make sure you don’t try anything,” She answered.

Klous watched her for a moment, then felt his heart lurch as his foot slipped on the wooden planks. The treacherous foot scraped against the edge of the board, stinging as the skin on his ankle was torn, then hung suspended in space while his other foot shot out the other direction. Expecting to hit the boards and then fall to the jungle floor below, Klous found his breath jerked from him as he stopped abruptly. He scrambled to get his feet back under him and his arms on the rope handrails so he could stand up again. Once he was standing Kira let go of him and shook her head.

“ Pay attention!” She snapped. “Everything will kill you here, even the rain. Everything!”

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak. His ankle stung but he could walk on it. He glanced ahead and saw Sharp looking back at him, an annoyed crease to his eyebrows. Klous hurried after him, or at least it felt like he hurried now that he was taking each step much more carefully.

Two trees and one platform later, Klous marveled at how the survivors of the Rented Mule had managed to do so much with so little. He’d seen shelters and hammocks in the trees as well as tables and even signs of firepots for cooking. Now they were headed towards a tree with a shelf or platform built around it as well as a hollow within it. Above the platform a matching roof had been made of wood, bark, and even long grasses woven together.

Sharp pulled up sharply as a figure emerged from the tree. Another person was behind him, directly. The man in front lurched forward and fell to the decking, a knife protruding him his back. Klous cursed, recognizing his brother. Cooper knelt down and pulled it free, then looked up when Sharp and Klous both shouted.

“ Cooper, damn it, drop the knife!” Klous screamed. His words were jumbled by the storm and Sharp’s own shout. Kira slipped past both of them too quickly for Klous to even marvel at how she’d managed to get around them on the narrow bridge.

Klous watched as Cooper stood, knife in hand. He turned to face them and saw Kira approaching. Klous was close enough to see Cooper grin. He wasn’t close enough to see the feverish glint in Cooper’s eye but he knew it was there. He’d come across Cooper once right after the man had made a kill and it had disgusted him.

“ Cooper!” Klous screamed again. His brother was a sick man but he was still his brother. He had to look out for him even if Klous’s thoughts were interrupted as Kira jumped off the bridge and onto the platform, rather than going directly through where Cooper stood at the bridge’s landing. The leap itself had been something near super-human, Klous couldn’t begin to fathom what was happening.

Kira swung around a pole with a skill reserved for the finest of adult entertainers and kicked out with her feet. The knife went flying and Cooper stumbled back. She landed and dove forward before Klous's twisted brother could react. She grabbed his feet and yanked him to the hard wooden platform.

Klous heard Cooper grunt out his breath even from a distance of twenty feet in the rain. He assumed the fight was over and started to move forward and follow Sharp. He froze when he heard a cry of alarm. Looking up he saw that Kira wasn't finished.

The muscular woman had grabbed his foot and now she yanked on it, pulling him with her as she backed off the edge of the platform. They fell, with Cooper somehow rotating around her to fall first. Kira abruptly stopped, her skirt flying up and coming to rest against her belly. Cooper, whom she'd just released her grip on, continued the twenty some foot fall headfirst to the jungle floor. His short-lived scream was cut even shorter.

Klous stared down, knowing that his brother was dead. His head was at an extreme angle and his body lay motionless. He looked up to see Sharp kneeling next to the other fallen man. Kira was climbing back up onto the platform. A rope fell from where she'd looped it around her leg to the floor, disclosing the secret to the magic trick she'd used to levitate. Klous started forward, confused and uncertain, but needing to understand.

As he approached Kira knelt next to her fallen crewmate. There was an angry red rash along her leg where the rope had scraped against her. She showed no sign of caring, her attention was focused on the man, Jeff, who appeared to still be alive.

"Get plenty of water in it and he should be fine," Kira said. "From the stream would be better."

Sharp nodded, then looked up at Klous. He returned the Captain's stare, feeling his own numbness turning into a sense of anger. He'd just watched them kill his brother and now they were acting as though he'd never existed! "Hey!" Klous growled. "What about?"

Kira spun around to face him. She stood up, a knife in her hand. Klous wondered where she'd hidden it, it was a decent sized blade and he'd seen no sign of it given her limited clothing. Straps! He remembered seeing straps on her upper thigh when she been briefly upside down. If he'd been paying more attention to her and less to Cooper he realized he might have seen a lot more.

Sharp rose up behind her, helping Jeff to his feet by throwing the wounded man's arm over his shoulder. "No law but mine here," Sharp said. "We're an endangered species on this planet. We all get along fine, but with you guys it's simple. You don't like it, you leave and find your own way. You do anything — anything — that threatens any

of us and you get the same treatment he did.”

Klous grabbed the same wooden stick that Kira had used gymnastically and peered over the edge. Cooper still lay there, as expected. He still couldn't believe his brother had died so suddenly and so quickly. Cooper was quiet and intense, and when the situation warranted absolutely ruthless and skilled. Sick as well, given his history of choosing people he could lure into situations where he could capture, torture, and kill them. Cooper'd always preferred women but he'd never had sex with them, he just tortured and killed them. He'd done men too, but out of necessity, not pleasure.

Klous looked away from the body of his brother, staring out into the jungle. In a sense he felt relieved. He didn't have to protect or cover for his brother any more. The crew of the Black Hole already knew or suspected what Cooper did, but he doubted they had a real appreciation of just how depraved the man had been. Klous had been able to keep him under control, at least. Now he didn't need to do that anymore.

“ All right Captain,” Klous said. He felt tired finally. Not his body, that was stronger and more alive than ever. He felt tired in his soul. “He had it coming. I didn't want it to happen, but he deserved it. We won't give anyone any trouble. Just tell me how we can help.”

“ Help me get Jeff somewhere safe,” Sharp said.

Klous nodded. “I've never known Cooper to leave someone for dead and not have them die.”

“ Anywhere else and you're probably right.” Kira let the mysterious statement go unexplained. Klous stared into her cold eyes and said nothing. He got under Jeff's other arm and together the two Captains helped the wounded man back across the bridges.

# Chapter 11

“ I can’t believe Cooper’s gone,” Lizzie said, shaking her head. “He’s been with you...forever!”

Klous nodded. The more time passed the less concerned he was about Cooper, even if it had only been a few hours. It was still dark out but Eric, Aran, Lizzie, and Ling all held up the portable lights. Tarn and Kira stood guard with their weapons. Klous stood back and watched, feeling useless, while Sharp helped Jeff at the side of the stream. They kept washing his wound with water, for all that Klous could tell, and occasionally Jeff would take a drink of the water as well.

“ All this rain, is the stream really necessary?” Sasha kept looking up and down the stream. Klous would have chuckled had he not shared the experience of being chased by a cross between a dinosaur and a chicken.

Klous looked at his people. Well, he couldn’t really call them his people anymore he supposed. Still, they looked to him because that was all they knew. Sure, the Black Hole hadn’t been a place for a close knit family and crew, but they’d shared it at least and knew how to get along with each other. Or how to avoid each other, in the case of Cooper.

“ Something in the air, the food, and the water helps speed up recovery on this rock,” Tarn said. “Eric was a goner when we crashed, had a piece of metal sticking through his belly. Kira took care of him and instead of him dying after a couple of days like he should have, he got better.”

“ Love of a good woman,” Eric said, glaring at the former pirate captain.

“ A woman that conspired with me to have you captured and killed,” Klous reminded him.

Rather than seeing Eric bristle with anger, as he’d expected, the man shrugged. “She wasn’t herself then.”

Sasha snorted quietly beside him. Klous saw Kira glance over at her and then away quickly. He reached over and took Sasha’s hand to squeeze it and tell her to be quiet. She jerked a little at the contact, then gave him a shy smile. Klous realized she thought he meant something by it. He almost laughed until he realized he’d never done something like that before for a member of his crew. Maybe he did mean something?

He pulled his hand back, a little confused by his own sudden emotions. “So who was she?”

“ Emily Bradford, a bounty hunter and an assassin,” Kira said. She

turned to face him. "Stick around long enough without getting killed and I'll tell you about it. Until then, just remember what happened to you and what happened to your man and don't fuck with us."

He felt as much as saw Sasha stiffen beside him. Klous looked at Kira and saw that the woman had no bluff about her. He heard Tarn chuckle off to the side and remembered how the man had seemed nothing but impressed with her time and again, and he had been a Marine FIST, the best the military had to offer when it came to special operative.

Klous nodded finally, reaching a decision. "Cooper was my younger brother. He had a problem, he liked to hurt things. Anything really, but people the most. Like I said, he had it coming."

The expressions from Lizzie and Sasha were the most notable to him. Open-mouthed shock at his admission. Klous shrugged as he met their gazes. "None of us are innocent, but Cooper...well, he was about as bad as they come."

"Your brother?" Sasha whispered.

He nodded. "Didn't need nobody knowing that though. Now I guess it doesn't matter."

Her hand found his this time. He found it comforting, but only after he forced his confusion aside. He noticed Lizzie look over to Ling and found that the large man was looking back at her. Klous smirked and returned his attention to Kira. "Just try not to kill anybody else without giving them a fair shake first? Yes we were pirates and yes, we've done bad things...but other than Cooper none of us done it just because it was fun. Money? Yes. Revenge, maybe. Fun? No."

Kira nodded.

Jeff broke the somber conversation by standing up with some assistance from Sharp. He moved his neck and arm about, then grimaced. "It's better, I think. Doesn't hurt as much to breathe and I don't feel as weak anymore."

Sharp clapped him, lightly, on the shoulder and turned to the others. "Let's head back. Rain's keeping the animals in hiding but our lights are sure to draw something out sooner or later."

Klous looked at the lights and frowned. If they brought in more predators like the chickasaurus why were they using them? "Sharp, why not put them out?"

"Only thing worse than letting the jungle know where we are is stumbling around in the dark and not knowing what might be coming for us."

Klous nodded. The reasoning was sound and, after what he'd seen, he's rather take his chances than trust to blind luck.

They walked back through the jungle, moving quicker now that Jeff was improving almost by the minute. The stream was another

small one that ran through the jungle and was located only a few minutes from Treetown. They made it back without incident, aside from Lizzie slipping on the muddy ground. She twisted her ankle in the process but Ling was there to help her up and carry her back. Sasha and Klous shared a knowing look as they walked.

“Hey Sharp,” Klous asked at the base of the ropes that led up to Treetown. “We put a salvage beacon out in orbit around this planet. We called it Vitalis, but if you’d like we can change it when somebody comes and finds us.”

Sharp looked at him for a long moment, then offered what looked like a genuine smile. “Vitalis is just fine. Come on up, we’ve got some expansion to do in the next few days if you guys are going to be comfortable.”

“A beacon?” Kira asked.

“Yeah, probably be a few years at best though. We did what we could to jam your signal then when we got here we figured on the potential of the place. Figured it was undiscovered, but if we marked it we’d claim it under salvage law. No telling what we might get out of it.”

“You can’t salvage a planet!” Eric blurted out. “What, you plan on strip mining the place?”

“The Terran Coalition has been searching for a habitable world for over two hundred years, since before they even reached Earth’s moon!” Aran interrupted. “Even with ten of us we could still all be wealthy beyond our wildest dreams!”

Klous nodded. “He’s right, we figured if you were still here we’d eliminate you and stake our claim on it.”

“So why tell us now?” Klous noted the barrel of Tarn’s plasma rifle just happened to be pointed in his direction as the big man asked his question.

“Like Aran said, there’s enough to go around, besides that, you guys saved our ass out there.”

Sharp chuckled. “Not being stupid again, are you?”

“What? I don’t think so.”

“You’re a pirate!” Kira spat at him. “You never cared for what other people had or did unless you could take it from them or use it to your advantage.”

Klous felt something snap in his brain. It wasn’t an epiphany but rather confusion threatening to make his knees buckle. “How does that make me different from you?”

Kira stared back at him, her expression stony for so long he thought the storm might pass before she so much as blinked. “Come on, let’s get under cover,” Sharp suggested.

“Wait, he’s right. I was like that. It’s complicated, but I’m not

that person anymore. I can still do what she did, like make you cry like a baby, but Emily Bradford is gone.” Kira turned to look at her crew and then at Klous and his. “This place has a way of changing people, whether they want to or not. Even Tarn’s less of an asshole than he used to be.”

“ Hey!” Tarn protested.

“ She’s right,” Sharp silenced him. “Here I was figuring you was the one that sold us out, but the way you’ve been — the way we’ve all been down here had me doubting. Now we know it was Emily, but it looks like she’s already been taken care of.”

Kira’s eyes found Eric’s for a long moment until she bit her lip and smiled. He returned it, allowing her face to return to the blank mask of business Klous had become accustomed to on her. “Either we kill them now, if they’re going to be trouble, or we stick it out and see. Besides that, we’re light years outside of Coalition space, we may never see another person again. If we want to survive as a species here we need as large a gene pool as we can get.”

Tarn’s mild scowl shifted slowly to a grin. “I like the way you’re thinking!” He said with a chuckle. “I learned to never volunteer for nothing in the Marines, but I’m willing to break that rule. I’ll set up the schedule for the breeding program!”

“ Tarn!” Sharp snapped.

Klous snapped his jaw shut. He chuckled in spite of himself, but the chuckle died on his lips when he caught the cold glare Sasha gave him. “Yeah, well, we’re all stuck here together, maybe I don’t know much beyond running a ship but I know that if we work together we got a better chance than if we don’t.”

“ Good enough for now,” Sharp said. “Now let’s get up there, we got work to do. Rain should be gone by morning then we can make Treetown big enough for all of us.”

“ Best idea I heard yet,” Sasha muttered, moving past the rest of them to one of the vine ladders. “Let’s go Captain, I feel like a drowned rat and look worse. I need to get out of these wet clothes and get warmed up.”

The pirate Captain looked at her, then stumbled when a laughing Tarn clapped him on the shoulder. “She ain’t getting any warmer just standing there!”

Klous nodded and stumbled after her. “Maybe I could get used to a place like this,” he mumbled to himself, staring up after Sasha as she climbed ahead of him.